MARJORIE LIU

SANA TAKEDA

MONSTRESS™

image

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OUR COMEBACK WILL BE BIGGER THAN OUR SETBACK!
#backthecomeback

2019 HUGO AWARD WINNER

THE STORY SO FAR...

During an attempt to rescue pacifist Arcanic refugees, Kippa accidentally revealed a back entrance to the walled city of Ravenna. This allowed the Inquistrixes and a small band of lilium-powered Cumaea to gain entrance and wreak havoc on the Arcanic civilians inside, leaving Kippa injured and guilt-stricken in their wake. Though these young, unstable Cumaea clashed with Needle and Hammer and their more traditional ways, they were able to continue their trail of destruction through the city – until the Warlord arrived to back up Corvin and take command of the makeshift Arcanic army.

Meanwhile, despite the best efforts of Maika and a band of enigmatic warriors known as the Grey Riders, Colonel Anuwat and her human army finally reached Ravenna, and with their wave cannon they accomplished what few thought possible: destroying the city's formidable gate. The Battle of Ravenna has officially begun.

THE PLAYERS...

MAIKA An Arcanic teen who survived the Great War, and slavery at the hands of the Cumaean witch nuns. Ruthless and haunted, she is determined to uncover the truth behind her mother's murder — and her mother's secrets — in the hope that she can free herself from an ancient and dangerous god called a Monstrum that is imprisoned inside her body and fills her with an otherworldly hunger for human flesh.

ZINN A mysterious, primordial Monstrum of tremendous power that shares Maika's body and mind, and fights her for control. Once considered a god, and drawn into this world by the Shaman-Empress, this Monstrum is driven by a deadly hunger, consuming the lives of humans and Arcanics alike, leaving only their desiccated corpses behind. Though it may give the impression that its only wish is to survive, there's far more to this creature, and its desires, than meets the eye…

KIPPA An Arcanic fox girl saved from slavery by Maika. Innocent and optimistic, she is frightened by the Monstrum — but trusts Maika and will bravely defend her and others by rushing into battles too dangerous for a child.

SIR CORVIN D'ORO An Arcanic Lord, First Watchman of the Court and Commander of the Inner Wall. He is loyal to the Dusk Court but has willingly defied their orders because of his desire to protect Maika and his belief that she can and will serve a greater purpose.

WARLORD The Dawn Court's "Sword of the East," twin sister of Moriko Halfwolf, and Maika's aunt. Ruthless in her ambition, the Warlord's greatest desire is to unravel the mystery behind the destruction of Constantine. She believes the secrets of Constantine will protect the Arcanics in their impending war against the humans — but she does not realize that the answers she seeks lie within her young niece.

TUYA: Maika's closest friend in the world, who has been with her since before the Battle of Constantine. Unbeknownst to Maika, she is also the Baroness of the Last Dusk, a high-level member of the Arcanic Dusk Court tasked with containing — or even destroying — Maika's power.

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BATTLE OF CONSTANTINE. SIX YEARS AGO.

GODDESS, SAVE US.

MAIKAI!

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

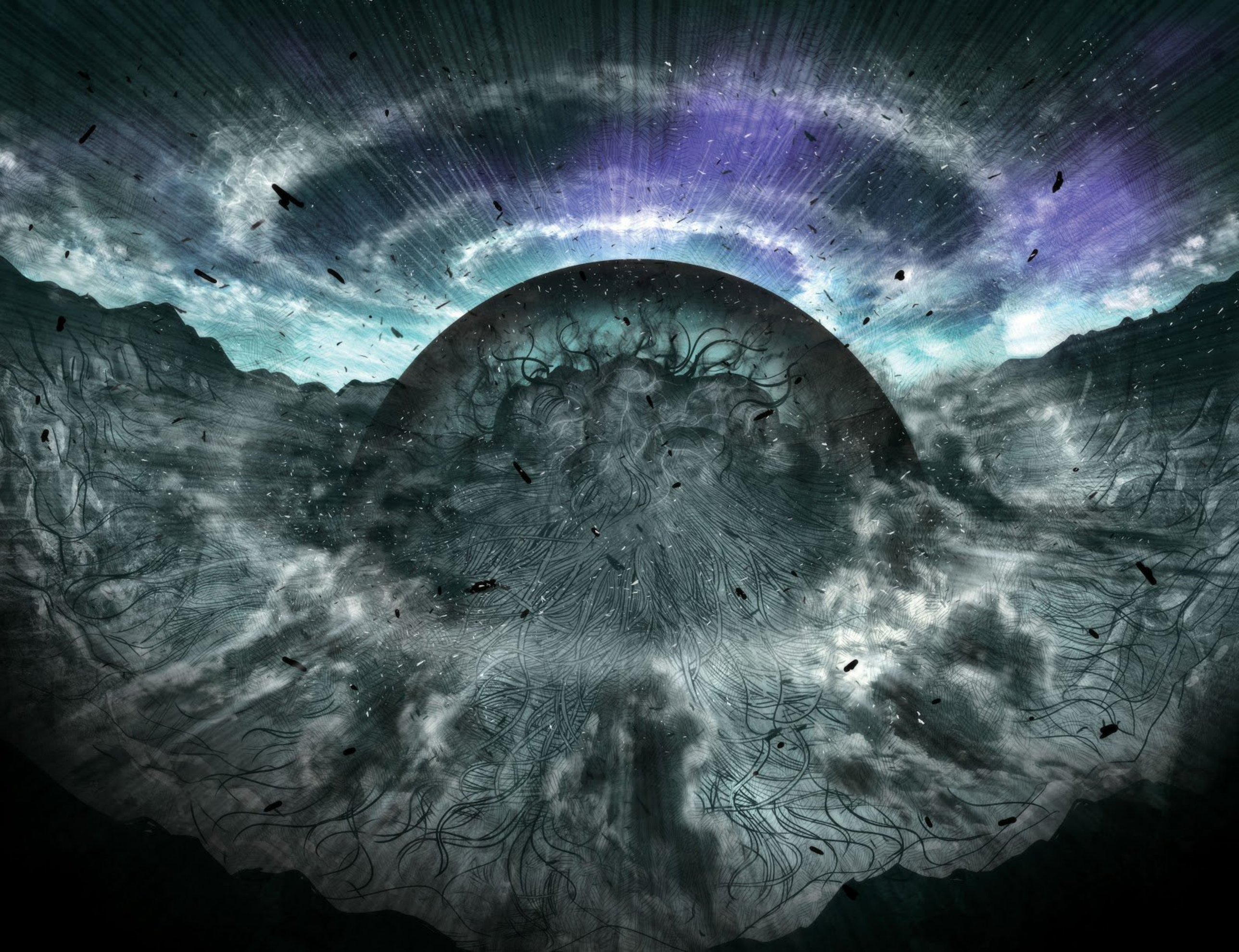
NO! LET HER GO!

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]



I USED TO READ STORIES ABOUT BATTERING RAMS, HOT OIL, ROCKS...THE ORIGINAL HUMAN WAR TECHNOLOGY.

BUT THEY NEVER TRIED ATTACKING ARCANICS UNTIL THEY HAD SCIENCE AND OUR MAGIC WAS ALMOST GONE.

BY THEN OUR SWORDS WERE USELESS. WE MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN THE ONES HURLING ROCKS.

ARCANICS JUST HAD TO LEARN HOW TO BE MORE CREATIVE, CAPTAIN MIN.

CHOOM!

WRAKOOM!

GODDESS!

UBASTI SAVE US.

THE HUMANS DIDN'T HAVE THAT KIND OF POWER IN THE LAST WAR.

YOU CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON A WITCH TO FIND NEW WAYS TO KILL.

THE FEDERATION WOULD FALL APART WITHOUT CUMAEAN SCIENTISTS.

I DON'T CARE WHAT THE PLAN IS, HALFWOLF...RAVENNA IS LOST.

MAYBE, VELA.

BUT THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY TO SURVIVE. IF YOU CAN *SURVIVE,* THEN YOU CAN WIN.

ENOUGH. WE VOTED TO BE HERE. WE CAN VOTE TO LEAVE, BUT UNTIL THEN, YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO.

GO ON WITHOUT US. THE HALFWOLF AND I WILL CATCH UP.

=SIGH= AS YOU WISH.

WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND, CAPTAIN MIN?

BACK IN THE FOREST, I WATCHED YOU KILL THOSE FEDERATION SOLDIERS.

ONE THING HAS BEEN BOTHERING ME.

JUST ONE?

YOU WERE SPEAKING AN OLD FEDERATION WAR DIALECT AT THE TIME.

ONLY HUMAN SOLDIERS USE IT...TO KEEP ENEMIES FROM UNDERSTANDING THEM IN BATTLE.

BUT YOU WERE *FLUENT.* YOUR TONES WERE *PERFECT.*

SO SAYS SOMEONE WHO MUST BE FLUENT, AS WELL.

LET ME GUESS... YOU LIVED IN THE FEDERATION, DIDN'T YOU? BEFORE THE WAR.

IT'S NOT SOMETHING I LIKE TO DISCUSS. TIMES WERE DIFFERENT WHEN I WAS A CHILD.

HERE'S SOMETHING I NEVER TELL ANYONE.

WHEN I WAS SMALL, MY MOTHER TOOK ME TO THE FEDERATION TO BE EDUCATED AT THE SETHIHAR WAR SCHOOL.

I LIVED THERE FOR TEN MONTHS.

INCREDIBLE. I LIVED THERE, AS WELL...FOR TWO FULL TERMS. DID YOU... LIKE IT?

THE TRUTH? I ENJOYED IT VERY MUCH.

THERE WAS ART AND SCIENCE UNLIKE ANYTHING I'D EVER SEEN. I HAD A FRIEND, EVEN.

I LIKED IT, TOO. BUT I NEVER FELT SAFE. NOT FOR ONE MOMENT.

I'VE NEVER FELT SAFE ANYWHERE.

I'M NOT WHAT YOU SHOULD BE STUDYING, CAPTAIN MIN.

RAVENNA IS ABOUT TO BE FAR MORE INTERESTING.

WEAPONS READY. ANYTHING TWITCHES, SHOOT IT.

SHOOT WHAT? NO ONE'S HERE.

SHHH, DON'T TALK SO LOUD.

COLONEL ANUWAT...THERE'S NO RESISTANCE.

IT'S AS IF THE DEMONS ABANDONED THIS QUARTER OF THE CITY.

THEY'RE HIDING. SECURE THE IMMEDIATE --

OH, SHIT --

WRAKOOOM!

CRAMMBLL

THE WALL IS COLLAPSING!

NO!

AIIEE!!

NNFF!

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SWEET MARIUM.

THE DEMONS COLLAPSED THE REST OF THE WALL

WE CAN'T SCALE THAT WITHOUT EXPOSING OURSELVES.

THE BIGGER PROBLEM IS THAT THE DEMONS BLEW UP OUR FRONT LINE AND TRAPPED A THIRD OF OUR TROOPS INSIDE THE CITY.

SOMEONE IN THERE IS A LITTLE TOO SMART.

AND DO YOU SMELL THAT VAPOR? THEY USED BOMBS SPICED WITH LILIUM.

ER...THERE WERE LILIUM BOMBS IN THE WEAPONS CACHE THAT WAS STOLEN.

BUT WE WEREN'T CONCERNED. THE NEW LILILUM-INCLUSION DESIGNS WERE SUPPOSED TO MAKE OUR WEAPONS POISONOUS TO THE DEMONS.

THEY'RE NOT POISONOUS TO CATS.

PREPARE THE WAVE CANNON. WE'LL BLOW THROUGH THE RUBBLE.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE NEW CANNON TECHNOLOGY REQUIRES SPECIAL LILIUM CHARGES. WE WERE IN SUCH HASTE TO MARCH ON RAVENNA, REQUISTIONS WAS ONLY ABLE TO --

YOU'RE ABOUT TO TELL ME WE DON'T HAVE EXTRA CHARGES.

WE HAVE ONE. THE REST ARE COMING WITH THE AIR FLEET.

BUT WE SHOULD SAVE THAT CHARGE IN CASE OF AN ATTACK --

YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS TO LEAVE MY SIGHT, OR I WILL SHOOT WHATEVER PART OF YOU I FIND MOST OFFENSIVE.

ON YOUR WAY OUT, GIVE THE ORDER FOR THE MORTARS TO BE BROUGHT UP. COMMENCE FIRING IMMEDIATELY.

BUT OUR SOLDIERS... THEY'RE TRAPPED INSIDE --

ACCEPTABLE LOSSES.

AND ONE OF YOU, RAISE THE AIR COMMANDER. I WISH TO KNOW THE LOCATION OF THE FLEET.

RIGHT NOW.

ARCANICS, SAVE YOUR ARROWS!

WE'VE GOT ACID BOMBS!

STAND CLEAR!

HAVE MERCY! WE SURRENDER!

FUCK, I'M OUT OF AMMO!

ARRGH!

COME ON, THEY GOT THIS.

THERE ARE STILL HUMANS IN THE BLACKSMITH DISTRICT.

AIEE!!

MY EYES!

RATATATATA

AHH!

ARR!

WHERE IS THE CROW?!

WE NEED HIS SHIELD!

RATATATATA

AI YA! YOU CAN NEVER COUNT ON THE DUSK LORDS.

GATE'S CLOSED, AT LEAST.

WE THOUGHT SHE WAS A LUNATIC, ORDERING WE BLOW UP THE WALL...

...BUT IT GIVES US TIME FOR YOUR AIR SHIPS TO ARRIVE, DON'T IT, MY LADY?

...YES...

...THEY WERE RIGHT BEHIND ME...

WHO IS THIS...SHE... WHO EVERYONE KEEPS SPEAKING OF?

MOST TERRIFYING WOMAN I EVER SEEN. YOU SENT HER, DIDN'T YOU?

KLOOM

BOOM!

GODDESS-DAMN, THEY'RE FIRING INTO THE CITY!

=GASP=

STAY DOWN, FOX. THAT DUSK LORD WILL KILL ME IF YOU GET --

URK!

NO! SHANNA!

NO, YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME, YOU CAN'T, WE'RE GOING TO HAVE OUR BABY --

BAM!

STOP!

S-STOP.

NNGH!

BOOM

BLAM!

=GROAN=

CLICK

"DON'T BE AFRAID, LITTLE ONES. WE SURVIVED AN ENTIRE WAR. THIS SIEGE OF RAVENNA IS NOTHING IN COMPARISON..."

BOOM

NNNGHYA!

...NO WITCH IS TEARING US APART.

MOTHER!

I'M COMING BACK WITH A BAG OF HUMAN HEADS! JUST WAIT AND SEE!

YAHHH!

I'M READY FOR ANOTHER ADVENTURE... AREN'T YOU?

MOST CERTAINLY.

BANG

THERE, MY LOVE.

MY GOOD, STRONG GIRL.

HUNT WELL.

GRRRR

:PANT PANT:

UBASTI, GUIDE ME AS I CHANNEL YOUR RIGHTEOUS FURY... LET ME BE THE VESSEL OF YOUR DIVINE WILL...

SISTER-GHOSTS! FEAST ON THE HUMAN!

ACKK!

COOORVIN.

COOOOOOOORVIN.

:TICKLE: :TICKLE:

BETTANI.

BETTANI!

SVAASHH

=GASP=

I'VE GOT YOU... JUST HOLD ON!

IF I DO SAY SO MYSELF, COLONEL, IT APPEARS THAT RAVENNA HAS BEEN SUBJUGATED.

THAT, PERHAPS, IS THE *THIRD* MOST STUPID THING I'VE HEARD TODAY.

WHY HASN'T ANYONE BEEN ABLE TO RAISE THE AIR FLEET?

THE AERIAL COMMANDER ISN'T RESPONDING.

WE DON'T KNOW WHY.

THE REASONS AN AERIAL COMMAND REMAINS SILENT ARE RARELY GOOD, LIEUTENTANT.

WHICH MEANS IT'S EVEN MORE IMPORTANT WE KNOW WHERE THEY ARE --

COLONEL ANUWAT!

OUR FLANK IS BEING ATTACKED BY OUR DEAD!

THEY'VE BEEN RESURRECTED!

=SIGH= CALL IN THE ARMORED GUNS.

HOLD THE LINE!

HOLD THE LINE OR IT'S THE FIRING SQUAD!

COME ON, SOLDIERS! FOLLOW THE COLONEL!

WE CAN'T FIGHT DEMON MAGIC!

WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!

AAOOWWW

EEEIIEE

AAHHRRR

OH, SAVE ME FROM IDIOTS.

NOTHING'S BEEN RESURRECTED!

THE DEMONS ARE ONLY TRYING TO FRIGHTEN YOU --

WE'RE FUCKED. I'M NOT ENDING UP LIKE THAT.

SEE THAT BADGE? THAT'S THE UNIT THAT DISAPPEARED IN THE FOREST!

WHY ARE THEY SO... *WITHERED?*

BLAM

BLAM

BLAM

BLAM

ARRGH!

YARR!

CHK

GYAH!

CHK

CHK

D-DON'T KNOW H-HOW LONG I CAN H-HOLD THOSE B-BODIES.

YOUR STRENGTH IS GODDESS-BLESSED, SOLDIER!

THREE... TWO...

SWITCH OUT!

THE LILIUM MAKES YOU DIZZY... CHEST TIGHT, LIKE YOU'RE HAVING AN ATTACK. EYESIGHT WILL GO NEXT.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT AIMING WHEN THAT HAPPENS, JUST POINT IN THEIR DIRECTION AND SHOOT.

=HRRK=

THEY'RE USING OUR STOLEN WEAPONS, MA'AM! THE LILIUM ISN'T --

SHUT UP. TELL THE SOLDIERS TO PULL BACK. OUR BULLETS ARE CATCHING MORE OF OUR DEAD THAN DEMONS, AND THE SMOKE MAKES TARGETING IMPOSSIBLE.

AND SOMEONE TELL ME WHERE THOSE ARMORED GUNS ARE!

HUH?

BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK

FUCK!

SHE'S RADIATING LILIUM!

DEMON! DEMON IN THE CAMP!

WHAT--

WHAT WE JUST DID WAS PURE LUNACY.

I NEVER MET A CAT WHO DIDN'T TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A GOOD DISTRACTION.

BOOM

CHOOM

BOOM

COORDINATES, CAT.

I'M CALCULATING AZIMUTH NOW, HALFWOLF.

HURRY UP. I WON'T HAVE MANY SHOTS AT THAT CANNON.

THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE!

TELL THE WAVE CANNON OPERATORS TO FIRE ON THAT TANK! USE THE LAST CHARGE!

COLONEL! OUR SOLDIERS ARE IN THE LINE OF FIRE!

WE CAN RECRUIT MORE SOLDIERS!

BUT WE CAN'T LOSE THAT CANNON!

HURRY, HURRY! LOAD THE CHARGE!

TIME FOR YOU TO GET THE FUCK OUT, CAT.

BUT DO ME A FAVOR...

CHOOM

KABOOM

CHOOM

CHOOM

ER, COLONEL... WE FINALLY HAVE THE AIR COMMANDER ON THE COMM.

WHERE ARE YOU? RAVENNA HAS TURNED INTO A DISASTER.

...ZZZT...DELAYED... ZZZT...IN PURSUIT OF HOSTILE FLEET...ZZT

...ZZZT... ASSUMED...FLYING TOWARD US TO ENGAGE...ZZZT...BUT IT WAS A FEINT...ZZZT...

...ZZZT... LEFT MAZRELPOL ONLY LIGHTLY DEFENDED...ZZZT... DEMONS FLYING TOWARD IT NOW...ZZZT...

THEY MUST KNOW THERE'S A LILIUM REFINERY THERE. BUT... HOW?

THE REFINERY LOCATIONS ARE OUR MOST HIGHLY GUARDED SECRETS!

...ZZZT...EVEN IF... ZZZT...INTERCEPT AND REPEL...ZZZT...FOUR DAYS TO SAFELY REFUEL...ZZZT... SOONEST WE COULD ARRIVE IN RAVENNA... ZZZT...NINE STANDARD DAYS...ZZZT...

...ZZZT...ON YOUR OWN... ZZZT...ADVISE STRATEGIC RETREAT... ZZZT...

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THAT'S A BIG STORM OVER RAVENNA.

HAVEN'T SEEN LIGHTNING LIKE THAT SINCE CONSTANTINE.

WON'T LIE...I'M GLAD WE'RE NOT HEADED THERE. I'D RATHER INVADE THE FEDERATION THAN GET CLOSE TO THAT DEATH-LIGHT.

WELL, YOU CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON THE BARONESS TO ACT ON GOOD ADVICE...

I DO, ALBEIT GRUDGINGLY, OWE YOU MY GRATITUDE.

YOU'RE A DOUBLE-DEALER OF THE WORST KIND, BUT YOU HAVE USEFUL INTELLIGENCE AT TIMES.

ME? A DOUBLE-DEALER?

BARONESS, DOESN'T STEALING COMMAND OVER AN ENTIRE AIR FLEET COUNT AS MUTINY?

NOT IF I WIN.

BESIDES, THE CAPTAINS WERE MORE THAN WILLING TO FOLLOW ME. THEY VALUE STRATEGY OVER SHOWMANSHIP.

NOT ONLY WILL THIS DRAW THE FEDERATION FROM RAVENNA, IT'LL ALLOW US TO DESTROY A STRATEGIC TARGET.

PERHAPS THAT WILL ALSO FORCE THE PRIME MINISTER TO FINALLY ANSWER MY DEMANDS.

HMMM...IT ALSO MEANS DELAYING YOUR HEARTFELT REUNION WITH THE HALFWOLF.

AND *YOU'RE* DYING TO SEE HER AGAIN?

NO.

BUT I DIDN'T PRETEND TO BE HER BEST FRIEND, EITHER -- THEN TRY TO MURDER HER, AND MARRY THE AUNT WHO'S HUNTING HER.

THE HALFWOLF MIGHT *KILL* ME, TUYA.

BUT AS THE POETS SAY: *YOU'RE FUCKED.*

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Archival research from the esteemed **Professor Tam Tam,** former First Record-Keeper of the Is'hami Temple, and learned contemporary of Namron Black Claw...

WE HAVE SPOKEN BEFORE OF THE FEDERATION'S FELINICIDAL PROJECT AGAINST OUR RACE -- AN ALMOST COMPULSIVE DRIVE TO EXTERMINATE US THAT HAD NEVER EXISTED PRIOR TO THE WAR.

BUT WHAT DID EXIST, LONG BEFORE THE WAR, WAS HUMAN FASCINATION FOR US. A FASCINATION THAT LED TO AN OBSESSION, WHICH LED TO A DARK, SHOCKING, TURN -- PARTICUARLY AMONGST HUMAN ELITES, WHO COULD AFFORD ALL MANNER OF TWISTED EXCESS.

THE CUMAEA MURDERED ARCANICS FOR THE LILIUM IN THEIR BONES, TURNING SENTIENT BEINGS INTO FUEL FOR THEIR DEPRAVED TECHNOLOGIES. BUT WHAT WEALTHY HUMANS WANTED FROM CATS WAS NO LESS DIABOLICAL...WHAT THEY CRAVED WAS AMUSEMENT.

AND SO THEY DEVISED A WAY TO ERASE OUR MINDS.

THE PROCESS IS SIMPLE: WE ARE LOBOTOMIZED.

TAILS CUT OFF, REDUCED SOMETIMES TO JUST ONE, OR NONE AT ALL. WHAT REMAINS IS PURE INSTINCT, WITHOUT ACCESS TO HIGHER FORMS OF THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE.

WHAT GOES ON IN THE MIND OF SUCH A CAT? ARE THEY STILL CONSCIOUS OF THEMSELVES, BUT UNABLE TO REACT BEYOND THE BASIC IMPULSES OF THEIR NEW PHYSICAL LIMITS? OR HAVE THEIR SOULS FLED THEIR BODIES FOR THE SAFETY OF UBASTI?

WE DO NOT EVEN RESCUE THEM ANYMORE. THE PROCESS CANNOT BE REVERSED, AND AT LEAST THESE ONCE-CATS SOMETIMES ROAM FREE WITHIN THE FEDERATION, FED AND PAMPERED.

BUT WHEN WE CAN, WHEN WE ARE ABLE, WE GO DEEP INTO FEDERATION TERRITORY TO SEEK AND DESTROY THE SECRET BREEDING FARMS WHERE LOBOTOMIZED MOTHERS ARE FORCED TO BEAR KITTENS THAT ARE ALLOWED, AT BEST, A MONTH OF CONSCIOUSNESS BEFORE THEY UNDERGO THE SURGERY THAT WILL DOOM THEM TO A MINDLESS LIFE.

I AM ASHAMED TO SAY THAT SUCH MISSIONS DO NOT HAPPEN AS OFTEN AS THEY SHOULD. YOU SEE, KITS, THERE ARE LIMITS TO COURAGE.

AND THE FEAR OF BEING CAUGHT AND...ERASED...IS MORE THAN MANY CAN BEAR. INCLUDING MYSELF. I WOULD FACE THE LONG-TOOTHED SNARL OF UBASTI'S MOTHER, BEFORE I WOULD FACE THAT.

SO CONSIDER YOURSELVES LUCKY THAT YOU WERE BORN ON THIS SIDE OF THE WALL. AND SHOULD YOU EVER BE FORCED TO TEST YOUR COURAGE FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS, I PRAY TO UBASTI YOU FIND THE STRENGTH TO RISE WHERE OTHERS HAVE NOT.

NEXT ISSUE

#monstress

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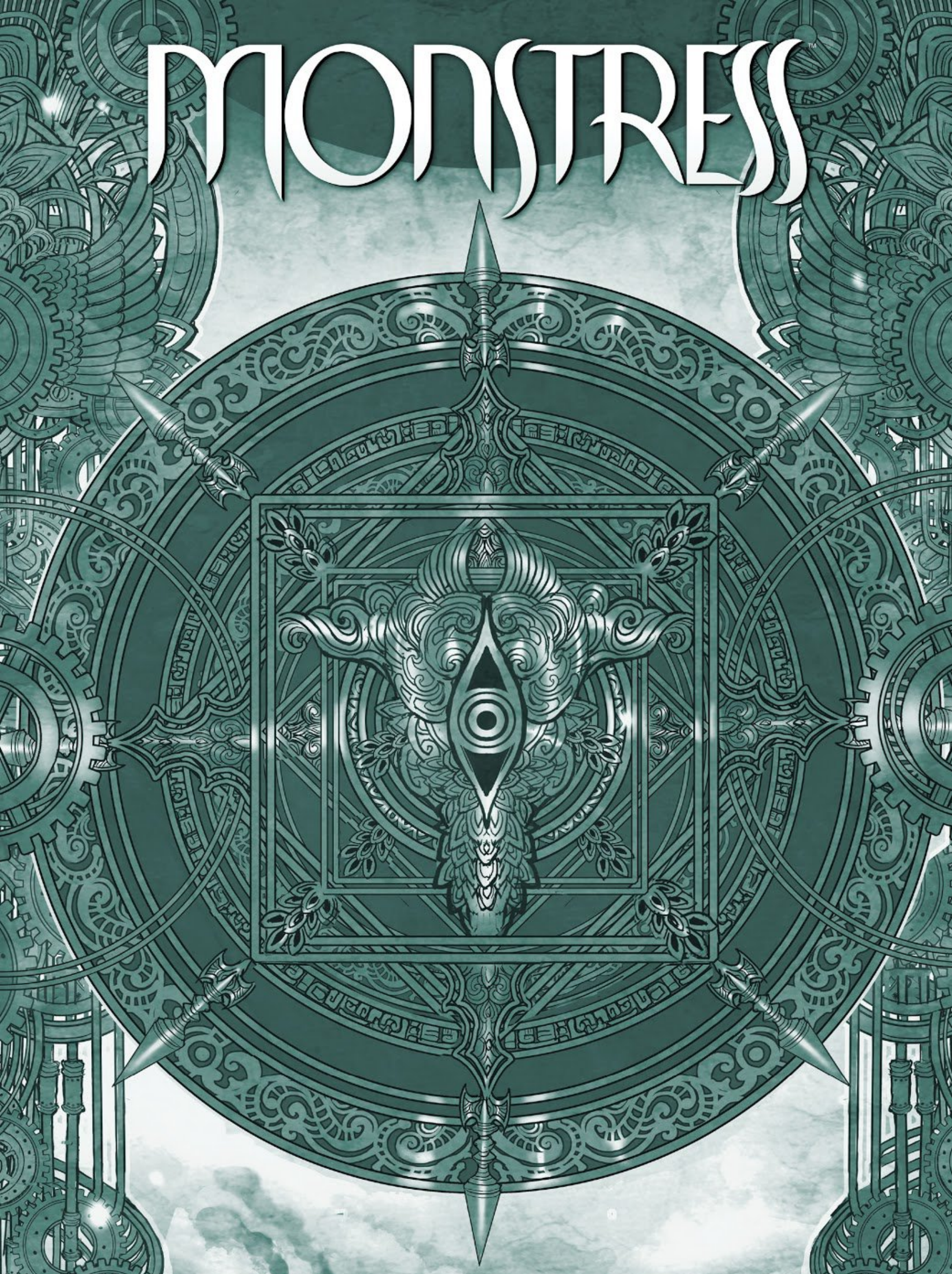

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